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Army Plans for 'What if' Latin War

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WASHINGTON, May 3 — The Army has begun a study to determine the military and civic actions that would be necessary if American troops were ordered into a hostile situation in Central America, officers said today.

President Reagan and senior Administration officials have repeatedly said they have no intention of deploying combat forces to Central America except for periodic maneuvers, such as those coming to a close in Honduras.

But Administration officials have also said the United States must be prepared, under the Rio Pact of 1947, to dispatch military forces to the region if the security of the Western Hemisphere is threatened and if members of the pact agree to collective action.

What the Study Will Examine

Officers said these were among the kinds of questions the study would seek to answer:

¶What kind of artillery training will be necessary to prevent gunners from causing what the Army calls "collateral" damage, which means killing civilians? In massed warfare, artillerymen are trained to lay down barrages; in a low-intensity conflict, they may be required to fire one accurate shot at a time.

¶What kinds of small-unit tactics are best suited to antiguerrilla operations?

¶How do Americans build intelligence networks so that immediate tactical information can be gathered. In the Lebanon and Grenada operations, the lack of good intelligence has been singled out as a critical failure.

¶In civic action, how do American soldiers help the citizens of the nation being assisted in a way that the United States does not take over tasks that the government of that nation should be doing for itself?

The officers said that, in addition, the results of the study could be used to train younger officers who have been commissioned since the end of the Vietnam War. Most majors and all captains and lieutenants came into the Army after Vietnam.

The 'What if' Question

The Army officers acknowledged the Administration's policy on the use of combat forces in Central America but said they must be prepared in the event that policy is changed. "We have to be able to answer the question 'what if?'" one officer said.

"We didn't adapt too well to Vietnam," the officer said, "and we've got to do better next time."

The results of the inquiry, the first of which are expected by the beginning of next year, will be primarily used to train troops for what the Army calls "low intensity conflict," which includes counterinsurgency.

The lessons from the inquiry would also help formulate doctrine and plans for the Army's new light-infantry divisions, other divisions such as the 82d Airborne, and Rangers and Special Forces, in addition to logistic units to support them if they are sent to Central America, the officers said.

The inquiry was recommended by Gen. Wallace H. Nutting, who formerly commanded United States forces in Latin America from a headquarters in Panama and who now heads the Readiness Command, with headquarters in Tampa, Fla., which is responsible for preparing forces for deployment overseas.

Army Chief Approved Project

The project has just been approved by the Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. John A. Wickham Jr., who has invited the Air Force, the Navy and the Marine Corps to take part and who plans to invite the State Department, the Agency for International Development, the Central Intelligence Agency and other interested departments to take part, the officers said.

The exercises that are winding down in Honduras now include Big Pine 3, which had 4,500 American troops there at its peak, and Universal Trek, which had 6,000 Americans both in Honduras and aboard ships.

In addition, the United States maintains 1,000 to 1,500 administrative, supply and engineering personnel in Honduras at airfields and bases at Pamero-la, San Lozenzo and La Cieba, in addition to a small contingent at a training center near Trujillo. An infantry brigade of 4,000 soldiers is also on duty in Panama.

When General Nutting testified before Congress last winter, he said that meeting low-intensity threats required coordinated action. "As a nation," he said, "we seem not to well understand this form of conflict, nor are we well organized to cope with it."

'Central Strategic Issue'

"In my opinion," the general said, "this is the central strategic issue facing the United States today."

Officers familiar with General Nut-

ting's suggestion said much of the Army's thinking and training today was oriented toward large-scale, armored and artillery warfare in Europe or the ultimate in high-intensity warfare — nuclear war.

The officers said a group of about 20 officers specializing in Latin American matters, guerrilla warfare and civic action like psychological warfare and medical care would do the study.

They said the first task would be to sift through the historical information about the insurgent phase of the war in Vietnam to pull out the relevant tactical lessons. "We don't want to re-invent the wheel," one officer said.

So far, much of the assessment of Vietnam has been on the operational and strategic rather than the tactical level. After the trauma of Vietnam, and the lack of popular support for the American effort there, most officers recoiled from any systematic study of lessons to be learned from that war.

The inquiry will also look into analyses of other antiguerrilla and small operations, such as those conducted by the British in Malaysia in the 1950's.